Idaho Energy Buzz
August 2006

Northwest's First Geothermal Power Plant to be Located in Idaho

By Michael Keckler, Public Information Officer, Idaho Dept. of Water Resources

Four years ago, Doug Glaspey stood outside a locked gate in a remote corner of Idaho, and dreamed of producing power. Late last month, his dream became reality with a groundbreaking ceremony at that same remote place, near the Raft River south of Malta.

Glaspey is now chief operating officer for U.S. Geothermal Inc., which is building the Northwest's first geothermal powered electricity plant. The company plans to be turning out 10-megawatts by September 2007 (enough electricity to power approximately 2,900-homes), increasing to 36-megawatts within four years, and potentially 90-megawatts or better in the future. "We crossed a mental threshold with our groundbreaking ceremony," said Daniel Kunz, U.S. Geothermal's President and CEO. "Everything from here out is a new beginning with great potential."

It started in 2002 when Glaspey was intrigued after reading a newspaper article about a geothermal energy conference sponsored by Idaho Senator Larry Craig. "I picked up a name from the article, Dr. Roy Mink then with the Idaho Water Resources Research Institute. I called and asked him where in Idaho could the best geothermal resources be found? He said Raft River," which brings us back to the locked gate that Glaspey encountered when he first visited the site. Inside, $40 million worth of geothermal research information and production infrastructure sat idle. 30-years earlier, the U.S. Department of Energy developed and operated a geothermal demonstration power project at the site. But in 1982, despite promising results after building and operating the world's first large scale binary cycle geothermal power plant, the DOE capped the deep wells, shut down the program, and sold the land to comply with federal budget cuts.

Recognizing opportunity to pick up where the feds left off, Glaspey and Kunz - business partners and former college classmates - tracked down the property's Oregon

based owners, bought it, and formed U.S. Geothermal. While the Raft River facility will keep them plenty busy, the company is already developing a list of other Idaho sites where geothermal resources could potentially be tapped to produce electricity. Indeed, geothermal water can be found throughout much of Idaho, but tapping it for electricity production can be a risky venture.

"We think the potential is there but it can be a potentially risky and expensive venture," said Ken Neely, a 16-year hydrogeologist with the Idaho Department of Water Resources. "More technical studies, including exploration wells are needed to know how hot the water is and how much is actually available throughout the state."

At U.S. Geothermal, growing markets for green energy (clean and renewable) offset the risks. The company has a 20-year contract to sell power from its first plant to Idaho Power Company – perhaps the first of many such contracts utilizing a fairly common Idaho resource that in Kunz's words literally wells up from deep inside the earth.

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